

## **Are You Kidding? Reassessing morality, sexuality and desire in *Kids* (1995)**

By Jason Lee (July 2018 version - published version embargoed by Intellect for 1 year)

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It is no exaggeration to claim that the 23 years since the release of *Kids* have witnessed an ongoing obsession with children and sex. As James Kincaid (1994, 2000) has so expertly shown, this is nothing new and, in many ways, this is the foundation of recent culture. The excessive, simultaneous media worship and scorn, in the mid-1990s, of Harmony Korine, the 21-year-old screenwriter of *Kids* (directed by Larry Clark, 1995), indicated that Korine was powerfully unearthing divisive issues of the period concerning youth culture and boundaries. In an interview with *The Guardian* in June 2015, in preparation for the twentieth anniversary screening, Korine claimed that there was no way the film could be made today (Locker 2015). Too many people now would see the film as far too dangerous, it just would never get off the ground, but from a comparative perspective it is beneficial to explore the film across time. The American teen obsession with sex and weed is depleting. Teen birth rates hit a record low in 2017, with *Time* reporting in 2018 a drop in American students claiming they have had sexual intercourse from 47 per cent in 2005 to 41 per cent in 2015 (Sifferlin 2018).

For Korine the film just depicted normality, and was far less contrived than ordinary filmmaking, with Clark not having directed before and the actors not having acted. Given the depiction of sex and drugs, the film received an NC-17 rating. Miramax had paid \$3.5 million to distribute the film worldwide, but because they were owned by the Walt Disney Company they could not release it, so they ended up starting a new company to release the now un-rated film. The film created moral panic, with Rita Kempley writing in her 25 August 1995 review for the *Washington Post* that it is ‘virtually child pornography disguised as a cautionary

documentary' (Kempley 1995). Simultaneously, as well as being condemned with Clark as being the devil incarnate, Korine was feted as a messiah figure. As Elayne Taylor (2000) highlights in *Creative Screenwriting*, Cary Woods of Independent Pictures compared Korine to Sam Shepard (after reading the scripts for *Kids* and *Ken Park* [2002]), and figures such as Oliver Stone and Martin Scorsese proclaimed they wanted to work with him (Taylor 2000: 15). Following his directorial debut *Gummo* in 1997, Bernardo Bertolucci claimed that Korine was capable of creating a revolution in the language of cinema (Bertolucci cited in Taylor 2000: 15). *Gummo*, amongst other controversial elements, concerns a young man prostituting his sister who has Down's syndrome. Many critics have emphasized kids' apparently shocking nature. Other elements, such as its deeply moral stance, have been overlooked but, as part of the audience and as academic and deeply reflective critics, we can hopefully dialectically enjoy and even learn from the so-called immoral and moral elements.

*Kids* was inspired by real events in New York City when in 1992, primarily due to AIDS, condoms were being handed out to adolescents who wore them around their necks, while some chose not to use them and just have sex with virgins instead (Cavanagh 1996: 72). For Korine, the activities in the film are normal, but reviewers such as Kempley (1995) claimed her adult readers would not recognize their own kids here, and that the central problem of the film was the lack of characterization and communication, with Clark being compared to the character Jennie as a lost soul (Chloë Sevigny). In this context the director cannot win; because he does not preach, he is attacked for seemingly not having an opinion. With regards to gender, the film can be viewed as a purely masculine trajectory in terms of the protagonists' development, but the nihilism of sex is non-gendered. At Steven's party, Telly (Leo Fitzpatrick), aged approximately 16, has sex with the virgin Darcy (Yakira Pequero), aged 14. Given the age of consent varies globally this might not be considered controversial, but this is constructed as abuse.<sup>1</sup>

The film takes place within 24 hours, opening on Telly deflowering another virgin who may be just 13. Jennie, Telly's previous conquest, tests positive for HIV. She tries to confront Telly, takes a pill in a nightclub, and by the time she arrives at Steven's party she is nearly unconscious. Discovering her former sexual partner, and virus spreader, fucking a minor, she says nothing. Falling into a comatose sleep, Jennie is raped by Telly's best-buddy Casper (Justin Pierce). From this it could be concluded, simplistically, that Casper is then HIV positive, or at least has the potential to be, and the competition between the protagonists is over. This blatantly controversial content, along with the documentary style, combined with elements of expressionistic and naturalistic cinematography, create a powerful and highly disturbing film. There are also mesmerizing moments, where time appears to standstill, functioning as a backdrop to the frenetic lives of the 'lost kids'.

For the screenwriter, *Kids* raises important ethical questions. What is permissible, how can we tackle such material and is there a boundary?<sup>2</sup> Famously, the director Larry Clark was accused by many of being voyeuristic, like a 'dirty old man', along with the film's audience. But, in an age that claims to have already seen everything, the screenwriter needs to delve further into darker areas. As Jean-Luc Nancy explains, the reality of our time, the actuality and necessity of our present, is to present the limit as such (Nancy 1999: 53). There is no other more heated topic than child sexual abuse, but *Kids* operates in the nebulous world of 'children' having sex with 'children'. These might be 'kids', but they are also adolescents, many having gone through puberty often making deliberate choices, and enjoying consensual sexual relationships. Interestingly, while there is a claim that this subject is taboo and not spoken about, since the early 1980s many American and European films have dealt with the subject of child sexual abuse.<sup>3</sup> The story of abuse is ideal for screenwriters because it offers numerous scenarios for triumph over tragedy, for secrets to be exposed, for the 'truth' to be made manifest, or to once more be repressed. Plus, it allows for the nuances of doubt, given

truth and memory can never be fully equated, which reflects on the whole nature of storytelling and narrative itself.

Within child sexual abuse discourse, monsters are defined and delineated, then supposedly ejected. But, as with all discourse on 'evil', to split the abuser off, to place him or her elsewhere, as a foreigner, is to place them nowhere, offering the other omniscient power. Are we right to even think about this film in the context of child sexual abuse? According to David Finkelhor, the most cited expert in the field during the 1980s and early 1990s when this film was made:

sexual victimization of children takes place when there is a sexual encounter between children under the age of 13 with a person at least five years their senior, and encounters of children 13 to 16 with persons at least 10 years older. (Glasser and Frosh 1988: 5)

Within this definition, Korine's screenplay is not about abuse, but it clearly is not all about consensual intimacy based on equality. The film therefore moves beyond the didacticism many critics call for and enters the arena of ambiguity where art operates at its highest.

While it might be pushing a 'queer' reading too far, for Jesse Engdahl and Jim Hosney, the film is concerned with homosocial bonding: Casper having sex with Jennie is the closest he will get to sex with Telly (Engdahl and Hosney 1995–96: 42). With regards to difference, neither of the boys allows their sexual partners enjoyment, eliminating equality but also situating sex as death. The final shot of the film is Casper waking up at daybreak. A point-of-view shot, with the exact horror of what Casper views, is not presented, just a shot of Casper looking, the ambiguity of this ending accentuating the film's power. His exclamation, 'Jesus Christ, what happened!' may lead to the conclusion that, like Jennie, he was unconscious when he raped her. Whether this is child sexual abuse or adult rape again is

debatable, given both participants are of the same age, but they were unaware of their actions due to intoxication.

The UK was the only country to censor the film, 40 seconds being cut due to a law that states it is illegal to have a child in the same room as simulated sex. During the scene when Casper rapes Jennie a boy wakes up, just as Jennie observed Telly 'take advantage' of Darcy. Jennie does stir, as Casper pushes her legs up, and may be taking comfort in sex, after the nightmare of discovering she is HIV positive. Within this trajectory, despite her failed attempt to warn other girls, at least Jennie is aware she has HIV. For Telly and the rest of the boys this would be impossible. They are too young, or just too lucky, to have HIV. Luce Irigaray (2002, 2007) has gone so far as to say the spread of illness of all kinds may have an economic motivation. She questions why during our period of civilization diseases of the immune system proliferate and blames the stress of civilization itself (Irigaray 2007: 56). Philosophically, *Kids* is an existential work, but its nihilism is tinged with a romantic poignancy, functioning as a highly moral warning.

Despite Jenny being unconscious, there is a question over revenge; through fucking Casper she may possibly give him HIV, which subversively attacks Telly. Another more plausible scenario is that Casper upon waking sees the results of his abuse of Jennie, her possible suicide, hence his extreme reaction. On a deeper level, the statement may also be a question, as in 'Jesus Christ, what happened?' This is the deeper final interrogation of and for the film's audience, and our 'pleasure', the audience being placed in Jennie's position during the final shot, unconsciously fucked, when Casper almost addresses the camera. Will we, like Jennie, be raped if we do not stop rape in general, the larger questions being: are we unconsciously undergoing rape? Do we desire this, and/or has society already been destroyed by such behaviour? These questions are embedded in ambiguity, and function at a deep metaphoric level.

Whether Casper was fully conscious or not, Jennie is over the age of consent. Telly is illegally committing child sexual abuse, in terms of the most current legal frameworks, with his apparent addiction to virgins, although again this is debatable within Finkelhor's definition (cited in Glasser and Frosh 1988: 5). Doctor–patient relationships may have a power element similar to some sexual relationships (Irigaray 2007: 57). Telly, like some energy charged doctor, sees the 'pleasure' he is giving as the 'cure'. With regards to civilization, the arrogant, war-like bragging conquest nature of sex, clearly situated as an 'invasion' within the element of harm, is condemned by Irigaray (2007: 58). But in her 'I Won't Get AIDS' work, a response to the claim that AIDS would instigate a more responsible and sophisticated form of desire, improving love-making, she claims it is irresponsible to assert illness will resolve problems. Sexual repression, denial and nullification is not the answer, but respect is (Irigaray 2007: 59). When it comes down to it, despite the hullabaloo, paradoxically is *Kids* actually too moralistic?

The trajectory of the two central protagonists dominates, but with regards to constructions of gender, while pushing homosocial bonding, this form of queer reading leaves out the position of the young women who are articulate and show their clear need not just for relationships but for sex. The young women are constructed as less nihilistic, while simultaneously in need of male affirmation. It would be fallacious to claim that sexual behaviour equates with identity in general, but *Kids* takes this premise to an extreme, acting moralistically as a stark warning. Casper, as a young man, is constructed as the most violent, and the most addicted to drugs; but Telly's addiction to sex is shown as far more vindictive, and he leads the way.

Importantly, *Kids* closes with Casper, but the central character is Telly, whose voice-over narrates the two most important scenes in the film, the opening and the penultimate. Here he repeats himself, stating that 'when you're young nothing matters, all you dream about

is pussy'. Korine moralistically reveals the obsessive and damaging nature of adolescent lust, which is equated with uncontrolled capitalist greed and domination, without boundaries or limits. Despite being made in 1995, this is fundamentally relevant for the Trump era. The paradox is that sexual freedom here functions as a trap for everyone involved, but everyone is trapped already, a theme Charles Bukowski made abundantly clear (Bukowski 2009: 11).

Jennie's body, after being raped by Casper, is concealed from our view. We never get to see her body. Both narratologically and thematically, stories are concerned with curiosity, directed at the concealed and the hidden body, 'with the concomitant suggestion that the source and meaning of the story is somehow hidden on or within that body' (Brooks 1991: 60). The source and meaning of this story then is found mirrored in Casper's face. 'Freudian theory posits the drive for knowledge (epistemophilia) as crucially bound to the body and sexuality' (Moi 1989: 203). But this drive is always inherently frustrated and, 'in the dynamic of narrative, we are always approaching that body, moving toward it, circling it without grasping it' (Brooks 1991: 60). Is Jennie dead for, at one extreme, the body must be killed before it can be represented? Along with developments from realism into its modernist phase, where, 'the frustrations of knowing produce a questioning of the very epistemophilic project', we find here that Peter Brooks is correct when claiming, the 'observer/knower is put into question, the very principle of knowing – as of possessing – another body comes to appear hopeless' (1991: 60). With regards to relationship theory and psychology, plus gender studies and queer theory, this is a revelatory point, for even the 'observer/knower' is put into question, so the performative construction of identity ontologically is just as nebulous.

Aspects of the cinematography, the long fight sequence, along with the intercutting sequences between girls discussing boys and vice versa, plus the coarse dialogue, all add to the film's brutal veracity. This obvious juxtaposition into a gendered binary in terms of gender groupings can be seen as a weakness; where, for example are the homosexuals,

transsexuals, post-sexual beings? But this is not merely realism. Here the film is a drama that appears like a documentary, particularly in the following sequence, which could be used as a sex information broadcast to inform both adults and teenagers about sexual behaviour and beliefs. Both girls and boys brag about their sexual experiences, one girl proclaiming she first had sex with an 18-year-old when she was 14, but she does not remember his name. Thus 'bragging', stereotypically accepted as a 'male behaviour', is subverted here, and the fact that she does not remember his name is actually liberating. One traditional reading is that it is a conservative condemnation of the girl – you were not even aware of who you had sex with! Another interpretation is more liberal – all men are the same, sex is just sex, it is about the sex not the relationship.

Gender construction is exemplified at the level of discourse within the groups. The girls' conversation is marginally more mature than the boys, with Jennie stating that the beauty of sex is foreplay, another theorizing on the differences between making love, having sex and fucking. The boys do not believe AIDS exists, as they think they know nobody with AIDS, while the girls realize it does, but one girl admits to having sex eight to nine times, four times unprotected. There is a central paradox again here. Through revealing the immaturity of the boys, Korine manages to underscore how powerless the girls must really be. The fact that young girls feel actually compelled to do acts they often find repellent, as they admit, just for some semblance of love, is shocking. Concurrently, however, while some girls just suck cocks because they are expected to, others enjoy it. Lesbianism is notable by its absence. This tentative acceptance and expression of pleasure, despite the heteronormativity in terms of the sexual acts discussed, might actually be the most radical element of the film. In some instances, the girls are taking control of their sexual pleasure but, as it is with the boys, it is their same-sex bonding that is paramount.



While Korine's screenplay emphasizes more differences in opinion within the group of girls than the group of boys, essentially, they desire to be desired, rather than desire the other. Korine reveals the stereotypical gendered power relationships that are already formed at this significant age; simply, the gullibility of the girls matches the manipulative authority of the boys. The power of the film comes from the deep tragedy of Telly's lovers, who are so desperately in need of feeling cared for. Korine's script emphasizes this, with Telly's two sex scenes possessing identical dialogue. 'I think if we'd fuck you'd love it,' is the film's opening line. With this line, Telly is trying to convince a girl who only went through puberty a year ago, her love-object teddy bears functioning as voyeurs, along with us. This is an uncomfortable position to be in, and leads us to question who is really 'perverse' here: those watching these scenes in a darkened cinema or the characters? The real pleasure of the other is not on the central protagonist's agenda; it is merely a conquest. Telly repeats this phrase later to Darcy at Steven's party, and once again it works.

Despite the various definitions, it can be asserted that Telly sexually abuses children, and Korine makes this clear. It is also made clear that he does so to assert a masculine identity. His mission to have sex with virgins is so clear-cut it indicates that his personal identity, including his gendered identity and identification, is ambiguous. After Casper smells the vaginal fluids of the 13-year-old on his hand for the second time, Telly declares he wants to fuck little babies, meaning Darcy. The girls only want to be cared for, as they put it, but Telly gets what he wants by muttering: 'I love you so much; I think you are beautiful; I think if we fucked you would not believe it, you would love it.' The response is, 'I am scared and I do not want it to hurt.' The answer to this is, 'I just want to make you happy.' This form of child sexual abuse is depicted clearly as masculine exploitation, with the opening and closing of the film repeating the same deceptive behaviour.

Whether all the virgins Telly has had sex with are now HIV positive is another question. He is seemingly unaware that he is a carrier of the virus but, importantly, he does not care. In Scene 13 at Paul's flat, Telly attacks the use of condoms while others declare that the AIDS scare is an invention made up by adults and if they had AIDS and were dying they would go out and fuck. They claim to not be concerned by death, potentially spreading death in the process. The sexual instinct is that which is supposed to be natural, and we assume natural is good, so Korine plays with the very fundamentals of our belief system.

For Michel Foucault, we demand of sex that it tells us our truth, so these kids are acting out their truth (1978: 69). Media images construct the myths we live by, and often possess a value higher than truth. There are numerous pleasures in *Kids*, its subversive genre being one of them, plus it is a western vampire story, with Telly and Casper sucking the blood of the young, Telly already the 'infected'. This is a mythic buddy movie, where the intense love and destructive relationship between Telly and Casper is overt. At Steven's party, Casper sings the theme tune to the cartoon *Casper the Friendly Ghost*, reflecting that he may actually be in many ways already dead, and his annihilation concerns destroying everyone and everything else in his path.

Telly's diction and pronunciation almost contain a speech impediment, and his phraseology is akin to a hero in a western calling his sidekick 'kid', furthering the frontier by his sexual conquests. Casper (the ghost) epitomizes the mad figure of the West, a living-dead phantom, always desiring more experience, more danger, whatever it takes.<sup>4</sup> The sexual conquest here, by literally raping virgins, functions as a metaphor for the conquest necessary for capitalism, these two young men literally trying to go beyond all frontiers. Again paradoxically, they question their masculine positions by asserting them.

The sex scenes are less explicit than the violence. In the former, breasts are shown, but genitals do not appear in the film. In American culture, observation of sex is a spectator sport,

but the film is not explicit. Korine manages to capture the blundering and awkward aspects of youth. The boys think they are being adults through having sex, and asserting themselves aggressively in general, but moralistically their behaviour is shown to be stunting their development. The opening long kissing scene emphasizes the passion of adolescence, while the sex scenes show immaturity and unimaginative sexual behaviour. Again, within a queer reading this can be construed as revealing the limited nature of heterosexuality.

As mentioned, there was a furore upon the release of *Kids*, with *LA Weekly*, amongst others, panning the film, along with those of Todd Solondz such as *Happiness* (1998), for being part of a new nihilism, portraying senseless brutal stories (Taylor 2000: 14). This is a superficial stance on the film but indicates a growing resurfacing of moral panic in America concerning sex, after a decade of relative calm and scepticism concerning child sexual abuse claims (Lee 2010a). After a number of high profile cases from the mid-90s juries were more sceptical of claims. Rather than a form of promotion of nihilism, *Kids* is a condemnation of such senselessness, raising complex questions concerning the construction of gender and sexuality, identity and society. By its denial of queerness, it makes such a reading overt. Telly and Casper are revealed to be ruining lives, with Telly betting Casper that he can have sex with two virgins in one day, the first girl apparently taking only fifteen minutes to agree. Importantly, just prior to the bet, a significant subplot momentarily becomes the dominant narrative. The lost life around them causes this abusive behaviour – society itself being beyond repair, uncared for, just as these children have nobody that cares. A competition takes place between the boys but this is not merely nihilism, for as Wilfred Trotter put it, there is ‘reason to believe that the sex impulse becomes secondarily associated with another instinctive feeling of great strength, namely, altruism’ (1917: 51). This is where Korine’s screenplay becomes deeply profound.

As with all good screenplays, scenes mirror each other. Just prior to the bet made on a subway car, Casper gives some change to a legless beggar on a skateboard. After Casper rapes Jennie, a blackout is followed by what at first seems an incongruous sequence shot from a bus, presenting images around New York, mainly homeless stray people. The implication is that this decline into destitution, alcoholism and insanity is a matter of course for Casper, who has sniffed glue since ninth grade, and continues to do so, taking everything possible, urinating in the street, raping girls and savagely attacking people, but still giving to the poor and being aesthetically sensitive and offering us pleasure. The paradoxical nature of Casper's characterization reveals the complexity of all humanity. The film was based on real experiences. The destructiveness was not contained by the film; Justin Pierce who played Casper, 20 when the film was made, died five years later of suicide.

This beautiful reflective sequence emphasizes the comforting surroundings the kids find themselves in. Despite Telly stealing from his mother, and Casper thieving from a shop, they are middle-class children, whose parents and fathers in particular are noticeably absent. The only adult in the film of any significance is Telly's mother, who smokes while she breastfeeds, lies to her son and is depressed. The absence of non-kids is profound; adults do not exist, other than mentally ill tramps who are behaving as children. The gendered adolescent groupings therefore construct the gendered behaviour, rather than the construction through traditional family dynamics. American culture is that of perpetual mindless adolescence.<sup>5</sup> Such behaviour can only limit development and lead to collective psychosis, disease and premature death.

For bell hooks the film allies itself with phallocentrism and patriarchy, being deeply racist and sexist, but 'if there is any crime *Kids* exposes it is that this is the culture that white supremacist capitalist patriarchy produces' (1996: 65). Her latter point is valid, but because the film does not glorify this culture. *Kids* is a condemnation of 'white supremacist capitalist

patriarchy'. Korine's screenplay reveals a collective mentality that appears robotic, within a culture of isolation, suggesting that there might be a choice but this choice leads even further into isolation. The sequence where Casper and the gang attack a young man for accidentally barging into Casper reveals the power of group pressure in youth culture, the gang already having verbally abused a mixed-raced homosexual couple walking in the park. Again, this can be seen as repression and denial. Importantly, it is not any explicit homosexual sexual act that causes anger. This brief public display of tender and innocent homosexuality, holding hands, is the trigger. There is a self-conscious recognition by Casper that tenderness and love are the 'other', and this must be destroyed. The film is more than two decades old, but it still has the ability to ask us to question what actually is accepted in society today.

If Telly had not had sex at Steven's party, Casper would not have been compelled, mechanically, and unconsciously, to rape Jennie. Likewise, without the bet and the admiration of Casper, it is unclear whether Telly would be so rampant, his rap-style bragging giving him more pleasure than the event itself. The group is observed with the cross between documentary, realist and expressionist styles widening the film's perspective. As Trotter puts it:

the only medium in which man's mind can function satisfactorily is the herd, which therefore is not only the source of his opinions, his credulities, his disbeliefs, and his weaknesses, but of his altruism, his charity, his enthusiasms, and his power. (Trotter 1917: 42)

The mass of stoned sleeping bodies on Steven's floor is a frequent image towards the film's denouement, emphasizing their physicality as a congealed mass, these bodies functioning in supposedly adult ways, their minds and emotions stunted.

Larry Clark, significantly older than Korine, has been condemned for being a voyeur, but he claims to be non-judgemental. Despite this common criticism, *Kids* is a condemnation

of this nihilistic behaviour. Whether this is a wakeup call to adults is another question. For the critic hooks (1996), when the camera returns to Telly and Darcy, and, in soft lighting, focuses on their naked sleeping bodies, this suggests bliss and positions them like innocent children, undermining the violence of their encounter, just as Casper's voice distracts from the violence of rape (hooks 1996: 63). A close study of this mass of sleeping bodies might also suggest that in this form gender differentiation is difficult to ascertain, and this might be the point of the scene. The boys feel forced to act, but this does not overcome their alienation. And hooks (1996) would be correct if the film closed on a romantic framing of Telly and Darcy. But, significantly, it ends on Casper's possible awareness. Does Casper have a final revelation and, if he does, is it too late for Jennie anyway? Whatever we personally conclude, within this apparent nihilism, there is a high sense of morality, and an acknowledgement of the horror of rape.

Korine's follow-up film, now as director as well as writer, *Gummo*, explicitly tackles the construction of gender and includes themes of child sexual abuse. Again, the complete absence of adults, other than as shopkeepers, is palpable. One of the boys' mothers does steal a scene, dancing in the dead boy's father's tap shoes in front of a large mirror, but her buffoonery suggests that she has failed to enter adulthood herself; the point is, with a mad mother like this, the son has no chance. These two films depict sexually active minors within a framework of violence and general despair, the absences of adults leading to an apparently borderless zone, where children rampantly act on nihilistic desire, trapped in destructive behaviour. A reading that utilizes approaches from gender studies and queer theory is beneficial, in that it indicates that such behaviours are not actually inevitable. They are socially constructed, and a more flexible gendering would prove less dangerous and draconian. While this is not overt in the film, which is why I have not extrapolated this

overtly, it is one central proposition that comes from this controversial film that could be taken forward for further analysis.

The work of Allen Ginsberg, central to the gay liberation movement and the sexual revolution, is relevant here. Ginsberg (2001) explained that gay politics had not dealt with disillusionment with the body and that the gay liberation movement would have to come to terms with the limitation of sex. He criticised the movement for its emphasis on 'gayness', which he believed took away the beauty of the lightness of love. Interestingly, he also explained that Hindus, Buddhists, Hare Krishnas and even Christian fundamentalists, all offered a warning about the body and a warning about attachment itself. His friend William Burroughs had written about sex being another form of junk, 'a commodity, consumption encouraged by the state to keep people enslaved to their bodies [...] filled with fear and shock and pain and threat, so they can be kept in place' (Burroughs cited in Ginsberg 2001: 309). This is a radical observation from two cult figures overtly connected to the sexual revolution and 1960s counter culture. *Kids* so obviously unveils this to be the case that it may seem unnecessary to point out, but it is still relevant in terms of highlighting important key elements concerning queer theory and the body. The central male protagonists are held in a competitive battle that, however subversive it may seem at first, mirrors the state and embodies state control.

In *Kids*, the consequence of this behaviour is extreme. The young and supposedly healthy become diseased, growing old and dying before their time. Child sexual abuse is equated with familial and social dysfunction, annihilation and death. For hooks, *Kids* is reactionary, acting 'complicity with those cultural forces that view the dilemmas in teenage life as solely a function of the absence of coercive control and authority' (1996: 67). According to Judith Butler (1992), there is no gender identity behind the expression of

identity. Paradoxically, the lack of men, the main conductors of abuse, leads to children carrying out abuse, mimicking the father even in his absence.

When Telly finally completes his mission and has sex with Darcy, consuming his holy grail, her pain is depicted and this is not love or enjoyable sex but torture. Casper actually observes this and is spurred on to rape Jennie through voyeuristically partaking in Telly's actions with Darcy. Jennie could be considered a form of 'willing victim', as Lydia Lunch has put it, one that prefers pain to nothingness (Sergeant 1999: 180). And it is useful to consider this style of 'victimhood' in general, as the girls in *Kids* do little to avoid exploitation, pain being better than 'nothing'. In this case, the film moves away from nihilism and accurately depicts a world full of sadism, which has its own meanings. Shots of people outside in parks and on the street, some exercising, some ranting insanely, reveal the external world that Telly and Casper must at some stage face up to. Telly does question Casper's brain-damaging behaviour and Casper may finally question his own behaviour and therefore that of Telly's. The central character's name, Telly, refers to the phrase 'tallying up', as in counting his conquests, the activity of fucking portrayed as the gathering together of units, in a capitalist fashion. In this sense these conquests equate with Luce Irigaray's point that people are looking for 'an identity-space', which tallies with accumulation, such as the number of 'matches played' or 'miles covered' in a masculine sense, other than a human one (Irigaray 2007: 77).

*Kids* is just one of many popular narratives concerned with traces of abuse that reveal the horrific outcome of apparent child sexual abuse, with death and destruction and madness depicted.<sup>6</sup> Child sexual abuse becomes symbolic of the wounded nature of humanity and has wider sociological ramifications. 'The story of the post-modern child and its abuse wakes up a palimpsest [...] the cry of "abuse" is a cry of our own collective pain at the loss of our own social identity' (Jenks 1996: 109). While *Korine* focuses on the life of these kids, the whole



outside world is reflected upon and clearly examined. Within capitalist ideology, people turn others into units, objects for their possession, consumption and exploitation. Capitalism and sexual transgression become natural partners and ultimately there is nothing shocking or unusual about this. In cultures where sex is situated as aggressive self-fulfilment, within competitive capitalism, the sexual abuse of children should not be surprising. In *Kids*, external social fragmentation is proffered as the reason why children sexually abuse other children.

Nihilism has been central to this analysis, and it is worthwhile noting how this relates in a positive fashion to a feasible future. The paradoxes briefly extrapolated through this analysis of *Kids* can be further explained with reference to Luce Irigaray's (2002, 2007) work on love. Paradoxically, nihilism is useful here because, in order 'to meet with the other, I must first let be, even restore, the nothing that separates us' (Irigaray 2002: 168). *Kids*, from this theoretical perspective, can be seen as an attack on western culture that positions all as the same, the world not allowing for, 'strangeness of the one and the other, the recognition of a nothing in common calling into question the proper of each one' (Irigaray 2002: 168). The characters in *Kids* are all striving for some form of pleasure, but the challenge is fundamentally to the audience. There is a basic understanding in the voice-over: being so far away from the reality of death, these kids can take risks and can position themselves on the limits, with a view to feeling more alive.

They act out violence against difference, such as the brutal attack on the homosexuals, but this is constructed as an attack on the 'real' self. Deeper than a manifestation of frustration and repression, it leads us to question why such violence has taken hold at such a young age, given that there is still beauty and charity in these characters, especially Casper. The binary opposition is not just of the gendered worlds, but of the physical worlds. The adolescents have their parties, go to clubs and live in mainly interior worlds of bedrooms; the street people possess their alcohol and madness and function as a barrier and zone that is a transit to the

exterior adult world. Both of these worlds contain strong romantic elements where freedom and liberty are touched upon, aesthetically represented as beauty itself. These worlds clash and merge, raising deep questions about the future, making us consider our position as an audience and our responsibility. Taken optimistically, the nihilism referred to is a challenge to our traditional thinking. Fundamentally, the ‘movement of the world will no longer result from the homologation in the same but from a relation to which difference remains the condition of presence and the source of becoming’ (Irigaray 2002: 171).

### **Contributor’s details**

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### **Suggested pull quotes**

The young women are constructed as less nihilistic, while simultaneously in need of male affirmation.

It would be fallacious to claim that sexual behaviour equates with identity in general, but *Kids* takes this premise to an extreme...

Through revealing the immaturity of the boys, Korine manages to underscore how powerless the girls must really be.

There are numerous pleasures in *Kids*, its subversive genre being one of them, plus it is a western vampire story...

Within capitalist ideology, people turn others into units, objects for their possession, consumption and exploitation. Capitalism and sexual transgression become natural partners...

Bernardo Bertolucci claimed that Korine was capable of creating a revolution in the language of cinema.

*Kids*'s apparently shocking nature has been emphasized by many critics. Other elements, such as its deeply moral stance, have been overlooked...

[T]he reality of our time, the actuality and necessity of our present, is to present the limit as such.

The story of abuse is ideal for screenwriters because it offers numerous scenarios for triumph over tragedy, for secrets to be exposed, for the 'truth' to be made manifest, or to once more be repressed.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the age of consent globally and of international variations in child sexual abuse,

<sup>2</sup> For analysis of screenwriting in terms of ethics, see Lee (2013).

<sup>3</sup> See Lee (2005) and (2010a) where this myth is exposed.

<sup>4</sup> See Lee (1999), where this figure is explained in some detail, especially in relation to films such as John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956).

<sup>5</sup> The unfashionable writer Robert Bly makes this point in a comprehensive fashion in *The Sibling Society* (1997).

<sup>6</sup> See Lee (2005), where numerous films are discussed.